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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000270

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TAGS: ECON EPET PGOV PREL BO

SUBJECT: DEFMIN SEEKS USG COOPERATION DESPITE THE OBSTACLES

REF: MINSK 154

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Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

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11. (C) Defense Minister Leonid Maltsev told Ambassador during their first meeting that he would like to deepen the military's interaction with the United States, but he understands the political obstacles to high-level cooperation. The MoD benefited greatly from past USG assistance, and Maltsev hoped to renew the previous level of assistance. The Minister stressed his commitment to professionalism by outlining for Ambassador Belarus' successful military reforms. Ambassador noted some limited ongoing areas of cooperation, but confirmed to Maltsev that any significant new programs would require progress towards democracy. End summary.

12. (SBU) On March 28, Ambassador called on Minister of Defense Leonid Semenovich Maltsev. Also attending from the Belarusian side were State Secretary and Assistant for Political-Military Affairs Col. Aleksandr Pavlovich Anisimov, Chief of the International Military Cooperation Directorate Col. Fedor Aleksandrovich Levsha, and U.S. Desk Officer Lt. Col. Oleg Aleksandrovich Chaykin; and from the U.S. side DCM, DATT, Pol/Econ Chief and Deputy Chief. (Note: The GOB took several weeks to authorize the meeting. End note.)

Getting Back to Where We Started

13. (C) Displaying an impressive knowledge of previous bilateral programs, Maltsev said he would eventually like Belarus and the United States to regain the level of cooperation they had up until 1998. He singled out renewed IMET assistance, travel by MoD personnel under the Warsaw Initiative Fund and the re-establishment of exchanges that previously facilitated travel by senior MoD officials, including Maltsev, to visit the Utah National Guard. Ambassador noted Maltsev's requests, but stated in clear terms that the USG's top priority in Belarus remains democratic reform and the current political environment in the country precludes substantive bilateral cooperation in any sphere, including in the military realm.

14. (C) Maltsev immediately recognized "political obstacles" to rebuilding the relationship, but he desired at least movement in the right direction. He mentioned English-language education and practical training in

peacekeeping as two areas where assistance could prove especially beneficial.

¶15. (C) Maltsev also stated his desire for more cooperation with NATO, characterizing the current level of interaction as "not serious." He hoped NATO would conclude a security agreement with Belarus. The lack of such a document prevents his officers from participating in most NATO training and conferences, and also hampers the work of Belarus' representative to NATO.

Maltsev Satisfied with Ambassador's Proposals

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¶16. (C) Ambassador ruled out IMET assistance, but noted several potential avenues for low-level cooperation. Some Warsaw Initiative funds and some participation in NATO exercises were workable. Ambassador presented military medical training and English language practice, as well as programs at the Marshall Center as other feasible examples of assistance. Maltsev replied that Ambassador's clear preparation for the meeting indicated they could build a successful relationship. He also reassured Ambassador that the MoD disagreed with Belarusian state television accusations against the Marshall Center (reftel).

Maltsev Promotes Professionalism

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¶17. (C) Picking up on Ambassador's acknowledgment that the Belarusian military has not become involved in domestic repression (unlike the MVD and the BKGB), Maltsev sought to underline the MoD's professionalism. He told Ambassador he would like to move to an all-volunteer military - but said that the economic situation made that impossible. Maltsev said hazing of conscripts had been greatly reduced and all

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reports of abuses, even verbal abuse, were investigated. Safety precautions during training had reduced casualties to just one or two per year, meaning recruits were more likely to die in accidents while on leave than on duty. These reforms meant Belarusian parents no longer feared sending their sons into the army. Thus, the military only had to enlist one out of three conscripts who passed their physical exam.

¶18. (C) Maltsev averred that he supported alternative service for conscientious objectors, whom he estimated numbered 100-120 people annually. He would like a law on alternative service, but in its absence the military simply did not conscript those who could prove they were pacifists for religious or political reasons.

¶19. (C) Maltsev proudly stated Belarus' entire military doctrine was public. He also touted Belarus' strict compliance with its obligations under the CFE treaty, despite the political and financial costs, as well as the destruction of light weapons and mines as required by additional arms control treaties that Belarus has ratified.

Comment

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¶10. (C) Although we had been prepared for a perfunctory courtesy call, we were very favorably impressed that Maltsev immediately admitted political constraints on further cooperation and expressed interest in the few limited areas where cooperation is possible and/or ongoing. Despite the necessarily formal setting of a large meeting, Maltsev was clearly at ease, smiling and joking frequently, leaning into the side of his armchair in front of an ornamental fireplace. He did not rely much on his briefing papers and only once in the eighty-minute meeting did he turn to his aides for confirmation of a particular detail; they were as surprised as we were that the meeting lasted well

over an hour.

¶11. (C) We requested the meeting largely on the basis that Maltsev is one of the only senior regime officials who has publicly contradicted Lukashenko. (On a number of occasions, the Belarusian dictator has threatened to charge the Russians rent for military bases in Belarus, but Maltsev has told journalists quite categorically that will never happen.) The Defense Minister's intelligence, hospitality, and honesty about economic constraints - as well as his complete avoidance of even a passing reference to Lukashenko - do not show that he is about to join the democratic opposition, but are nevertheless refreshing indications that he at least in part thinks for himself.

Stewart